

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **ANALYSIS OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING APPROACHES IN GRADES 4 – 12**

*Too often, [educational technology] ...is about teaching students how to 'do' a spreadsheet, a web page, or how to edit a video. What is needed is the continual asking of the question, "How can these technologies empower our students to be better communicators of their ideas?" (Theosodakis 2001)*

#### **3.1 Assumptions**

For every report encouraging the use of computers in classrooms, there is another one reminding schools that not everyone believes technology is the panacea for education. The Alliance for Childhood recently published a report that argued computers are dehumanizing children and lacking sufficient proof of increasing student achievement. The report also criticized the lucrative partnerships education officials have made with technology vendors (Rivenburgh 2004). While not agreeing completely with the Alliance's view of: "Our children face a daunting technological frontier of irreversible changes in human biology and the world's ecology. They need a radically different kind of technology education to make wise choices in such a future," I exercise cautions when advocating technology use in schools. From my observations of teachers in a variety of schools and reflection on my own practice, I have concluded that much of what goes on in classrooms is surprisingly based on assumptions and convenience. Perhaps in no other part of current educational practice is this more evident than with technology. The gap between intention and execution of using technology to help students communicate through story drew me to analyze digital storytelling in education. I maintain my own assumptions about digital storytelling in education:

- Developmentally appropriate expectations are important because digital storytelling challenges students to synthesize personal experience with narrative, visual, media and technical skills
- The context of a project has much to do with the purpose of using digital storytelling with students, and influences the end result dramatically
- Assessing digital stories often becomes a subjective process because teachers do not possess the storytelling and digital media skills necessary to make accurate assessments
- Students and teachers lack traditional oral storytelling skills as well as visual and media and computer literacies
- Teaching traditional storytelling and narrative structure is essential to improving students' digital storytelling skills
- Teaching personal narrative through digital storytelling requires more than the composition approach used to teach most writing genres
- Technology alone cannot solve the challenges of creating an effective story

My review of digital storytelling approaches contains four threads that address the concerns of both teacher and student. The first thread, represented by the English/Writing teacher, is concerned with evaluating first-person narrative writing based on established writing standards. Lipman and his four-part story coaching model represent the second thread, encouraging teachers to expand their assessment practices beyond mastery of skills. The third thread, the Center for Digital Storytelling's seven elements of effective digital storytelling, is the benchmark used for evaluating a digital story. The final thread reflects the concerns of the multiliteracies debate, reminding us that digital storytelling can provide critical practice in the digital literacy needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The following questions have guided my interviews with classroom teachers, workshop facilitators, after-school program instructors, and technology integration specialists:

- How was the CDS model adapted for use with students?
- What are developmentally appropriate expectations for student digital stories with regard to personal narrative writing and technological literacy?
- How does the context of a project influence story development? Does a focused theme, such as Immigrant Stories, affect the process more than an open theme, such as A Change in Your Life?
- How much of a factor is maturity in students' ability to synthesize personal experience with digital media expression?
- What was the teacher's motivation and main objective for the project?
- How successful are deconstruction techniques in teaching digital storytelling?
- What were students base skills in story, media and visual literacy?
- What role did identity construction play in the process?
- How were digital stories assessed? How did this relate to the established writing standards for personal narrative?

Over 5000 people have passed through the CDS workshop. Many have returned to their businesses, classrooms, non-profits, and after-school programs to tailor a digital storytelling approach to suit their needs. Nearly all of the approaches referenced in this chapter have their roots in the CDS model. The digital storytelling community has accepted most of the following seven elements of an effective digital story put forth by Atchely, Lambert and Mullen after the initial years of running the CDS workshop:

1. Point of View
2. Dramatic Question
3. Emotional Content
4. Gift of Your Voice

5. Power of Soundtrack
6. Economy
7. Pacing

Teaching students these skills and concepts then honestly assessing their completed digital stories presents several challenging issues. These issues can be divided into two categories: 1) subjective assessment and 2) insufficient attention paid to determining what is developmentally appropriate to expect of students' personal narrative and media skills. In this chapter, the five stages of a typical digital storytelling project are used to illustrate the issues raised by attempting to teach and assess a digital story that corresponds to the seven elements. A brief discussion of the seven elements in the context of two student digital story scripts is important prior to discussing the five stages.

### **3.2 A Tale of Two Stories**

“*My Backyard*” by Charlotte (4<sup>th</sup> grade)

*This... is my place.*

*From my house you could see the built-in sandbox and play-space that my parents and I created together. We also had a beautiful vegetable garden. At certain times of year, my vegetable garden would grow taller than ME! Our backyard was like a park. The bridge was the start of a trail, which went across a stream. And the trail wrapped around trees, bushes and rocks until it came to an opening at the bank of the Farmington River. Being a little girl at the time, no matter which direction I turned my place seemed as big as the moon. My brother and I were there every minute to help our place grow, and ride that cool tractor. Now every time I look at this picture, I wonder if this swing is waiting for me to come back and take it for a ride in my place.*



Figure 7: Screenshots from “My Backyard”

“Final” by Larry (10<sup>th</sup> grade)

*I had watched him shoot down so many others before. He could ruin them with just one scratch. My friends surrounded me, pleading for consolation, but no words of comfort passed my tongue. So far I had been spared. So far. I focus my concentration back on the monster. The look in his eyes let me know I was next. So much for lucking out I had thought. I was dripping with sweat, but I didn't pay it any mind. Instead, I followed his every move. And although I am sure he was aware of me watching him like a hawk, he paid me no regard. A small smirk snuck upon his face. I knew he was laughing at my pathetic attempts at survival. All of my hopes and dreams flashed before my eyes as he pulled out his thin, pointed weapon. Who would have guessed something so tiny could inflict such lethal pain. We were foolish to underestimate his power and he grinned at it. He still wore the scarlet smears on his hands as if he were proud of the horror he had caused. The tyrant slowly parted his torture tool from its protected sheathe, the tip of it was still red and glossy. I held my breath as the moment of my doom came closer. And closer. And closer. There was nothing left for me to do. No begging, pleading or bribing could prevent him from stabbing me in the back. And putting a giant F on my final exam.*

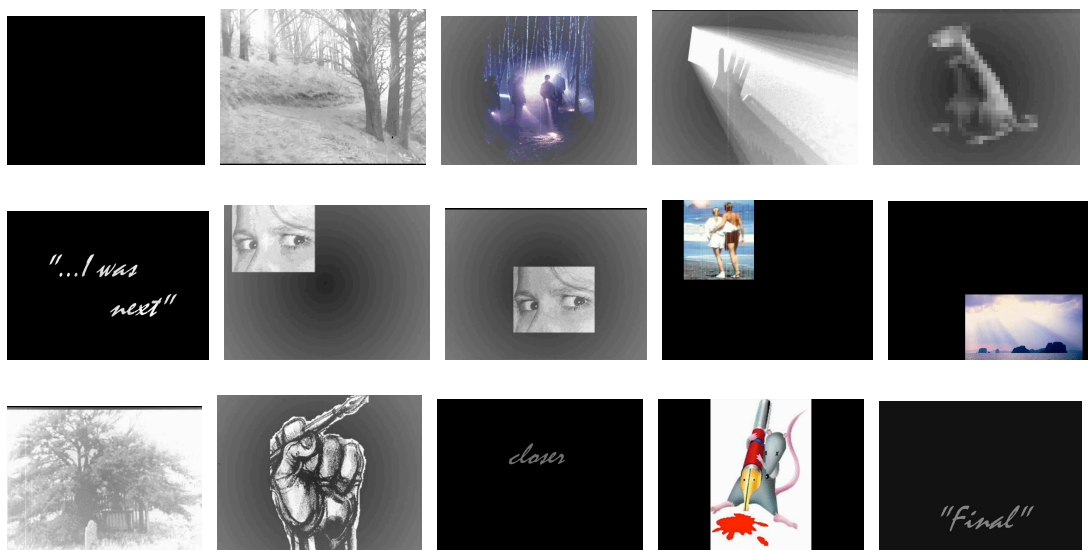


Figure 8: Screenshots from “*Final*”

1. **Point of View** – Stories need to make a point. “True” digital stories use the first person. In the case of “Final,” the student responds to a negative encounter with the teacher and demonstrates awareness of his audience in selecting an experience common to students. Charlotte’s story also has a clear, personal voice narrating the story.
2. **Dramatic Question** – Borrowed from dramatic theory, the dramatic question sets up the tension and goal of the story. According to Tristane Rainer in *Your Life As Story*, all stories can be reduced to a desire-action-realization model. The main desire is introduced in the beginning and establishes the expectation of it being resolved by the end (Lambert 2001). “Final” introduces the question of why is the narrator’s life in jeopardy, but a goal is not introduced. At the end of the story, we can infer that the narrator’s real desire is to confront the teacher and slay the monster. He is very successful in building up the suspense, but I can only guess at what he desires. Is it

enough for students to just want to share an experience in story form? The dramatic question is what separates a story from an anecdote or a narrated slideshow. Section 3.4 discusses the ways in which teachers have avoided the slideshow trap. Charlotte's story also lacks the introduction of the narrator desiring something. The desire-action-realization model is broken, but this does not mean that her story is not a digital story. Her story reflects the personal narrative writing expectations of a student at that age.

3. **Emotional Content** – Stories that speak to fundamental paradigms of death and our sense of loss, of love and loneliness, of confidence and vulnerability, of acceptance and rejection will emotionally engage us (Lambert 2001). Despite the somewhat detached voice of the narrator, I still can hear Larry's vulnerability and fear of rejection. Some students need a vehicle that allows a comfortable distance from the story material. In Charlotte's story, her connection to her former backyard conveys her sense of loss.
4. **Gift of Your Voice** – This is a more technical element that expects the teller to recognize the power behind her individual voice. A digital story with a voice-over that sounds like it was read off a page greatly reduces the overall quality of a digital story. Both students were comfortable with their voices, taking their time, sounding as if they were telling a story rather than reading off a paper. In Larry's story, he uses his voice as a weapon that might slay his monster.
5. **Power of Soundtrack** – Not surprisingly, students have a very developed sense of music and are always very eager to include it in their story. Used appropriately music and sound effects can add depth to a story. Sometimes silence is just as powerful.

This was the case with “Final.” Charlotte had chosen Mary Chapin Carpenter’s “Almost Home” that worked well to express her relationship to her former home.

6. **Economy** – An effective digital story can be told with a small number of images or video clips, and a short two to three minute script. For students, economy relates more to selecting visuals that are not literally connected to the script. Charlotte used ten photographs that were all literal representations of what she was saying in her story. This is perfectly acceptable for a fourth grader without any instruction in image selection or manipulation. Larry used a variety of grainy black and white images that recreated a Blair Witch Project effect. He demonstrated his knowledge of basic film conventions by cropping images to express a close-up, which heightened the sense of fear and doom in his story.
7. **Pacing** – According to Lambert, “good stories breathe” (2003). The narrators are also aware of the audience. In each student’s story, they effectively use the two to three minute window expected in a digital story. Larry adopted an Edgar Allen Poe pace similar to “*The Tell-tale Heart*,” while Charlotte chose key moments to emphasize what she missed about her backyard.

The story coaching model is a four-part process that seeks to empower the teller, rather than critique the work. The model is not limited to story creation. It could easily be applied to a student’s solution of a math problem or science experiment. Process is favored over product. I suggest its inclusion in a digital storytelling approach with students because it is best suited for projects where students control the flow of information. Digital storytelling is attractive to students because they get to drive the

learning. Story coaching supports the personal risk-taking that accompanies this relatively new driving experience for students.

1. Listen to the teller (suspending judgment)
2. Offer honest appreciations (avoid saying “It was good when...”)
3. Provide suggestions if prompted (this is not at odds with teaching responsibilities)
4. Provide opportunity for teller to ask questions or request help

I viewed “Final” in its digital story form so it was impossible to suspend reading the images during the story. I appreciated the novel way the author built up suspense with grainy black and white images and also how he recreated the scene of receiving an F on his final exam. I appreciated the respectful way he responded to the event. If he were to revise the story, I would suggest adding a clock ticking to exemplify the build up to the revelation of the failed final exam. It would also go well with the “*Tell-tale Heart*” effect.

### **3.3 Stage 1: Planning/Logistics**

*\*Note: block sections appearing in italics indicate scenarios based either on interviews or digital storytelling projects described on the Internet.*

#### **Pre-assessment**

The single most important step a teacher can take in planning a digital storytelling project is to complete a digital story herself. This will provide first hand experience in exactly what the students will be expected to complete, both in terms of the personal writing and the computer skills. Due to constant time constraints of the teacher’s day, this crucial step is often sacrificed, resulting in frustration when students struggle with a part of the project. The teacher often has the most accurate gauge of the student’s writing and

computer skills, and can adjust a project accordingly. According to Jeanne Biddle, teacher and facilitator of digital storytelling in the Scott County Schools in Georgetown, KY, “Far too often, teachers find themselves teaching writing when they’ve never had the experience of being writers themselves” (Salpeter 2005).

### **Beware the Bandwagon**

When the school where I taught was first connected to the Internet, I wanted to teach 5<sup>th</sup> graders HTML. I created a template for them to fill in basic profile information in between a set of about a dozen tags. During an impassioned lecture on how hyperlinks functioned, a student stopped me in my tracks by asking, “Why are we doing this?” I was livid. Didn’t he see the impact that programming would have on his future? Didn’t he want to add his voice to the pioneering landscape of cyberspace? I discontinued the project a few days later. The rush to hop on the educational technology bandwagon is often well intentioned, but lacking in thoughtful connection to clear learning goals. Direct and indirect pressure from tech savvy parents, students, and colleagues sends the message that teachers need to have students engaged with technology or else they won’t be adequately preparing them for the future. The following scenario illustrates a pitfall common to digital storytelling approaches in schools.

*Jerry wanted his 8<sup>th</sup> graders to gain some experience with iMovie. Many of his colleagues had had students using the novice video-editing program to create multimedia projects related to their curriculum. The school’s principal also strongly encouraged her staff to make use of technology in their teaching. The 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum required students to study immigration during the 1900s. To meet this goal, Jerry instructed the students to write a story about their family’s heritage. They were shown a completed digital story based on the family heritage theme and then discussed what made a digital story different from a slideshow and how the narrative was structured in the digital story. Students wrote their stories at home over a three-day period. Some chose to focus on one side of the family over the other. Some only wrote about one particular parent. The students spent a week revising and storyboarding their stories before beginning a three week, one hour per day work period in the school’s computer lab. The family story theme was*

*interpreted in many ways by the class. Some collected humorous anecdotes from grandparents. Some told stories of how their grandparents met or how their family came to live where they live now. Many followed the how-my-parents-met-and-had-me formula. The resulting digital stories tended to lean towards a narrated slideshow rather than a digital story following the seven elements. The assessment rubric evaluated students on their script, visuals, and technical editing.*

To the teacher, students and parents participating, this project was deemed a huge success. The students had performed exactly as instructed. They were now familiar with the *iMovie* program and had been exposed to a variety of important media and visual literacy skills. The absence of assessing what students learned about immigration demonstrates a common occurrence: technology's euphoria in the classroom steamrolls curricular objectives. The reasons for teaching students digital storytelling can be justified with many core curriculum and technology standards, but when the goal is to use technology, the content does not matter. If providing practice with software such as *iMovie* or *MovieMaker* is the purpose for a digital storytelling project, be clear about it. Tool literacy has its place in the classroom, but attempting to assess student-produced digital stories when that is not your primary goal leads to many problems. Subjective grading occurs when students are assessed on criteria such as script coherence and appropriate selection of images without receiving adequate instruction in those tasks.

### **3.4 Stage 2: Story Drafting**

#### **Digital Story Script Writing vs. Traditional Composition**

The central issue for schools implementing digital storytelling is figuring out how to adapt their traditional composition writing methods to ones that support writing for a digital space with moving images, text, and audio. Many educators who have learned digital storytelling through the CDS have struggled with this transition. For some, the lack of support for storytelling in the curriculum has forced a shift away from personal

narrative to content-area integration. Others have relied on the CDS model of showing completed sample digital stories to guide students during the script writing. Some have applied a filmmaker's approach where students develop a strong visual picture of their story and pitch it to a teacher and peers before beginning to write. Despite differences in methodology, all agree that without a well-written story, you have nothing more than a glitzy *Powerpoint* presentation. Three general profiles exist of approaches to digital storytelling: the first who focus on personal narrative, the second who target content-area integration, and the third who view digital storytelling as filmmaking.

Currently, no one has developed an effective alternative to telling students "keep in mind that you'll be using text, images and audio to replace written parts of your stories." This complex abstract skill reveals the largest challenge for the student digital storyteller. The bridge from traditional composition methods to what Porter refers to as "dancing script text and media together" still remains the work of educators integrating digital media production into their classrooms. She reminds teachers in her DigiTales workshops that "the essential question to consider: is the written script filling in the meaning for the images and sound, or are the images and sound filling in the meaning of the text?" (2004). This difficult question is often ignored because digital story writing is assumed to be easier for students because they can use images, audio and text to replace written description. For students who have not yet gotten a handle on the idea of "Show-Don't Tell" in *text*, digital story script writing can be a frustrating task. These are some of the issues that influence the actual teaching of digital storytelling. Students can benefit from access to a combination of written, oral, and visual tools while conceptualizing their story idea.

The CDS approach was developed with adults in mind. It begins with the Story Circle where everyone shares initial story ideas - trust, respect, and collaboration are assumed by all. Effective use of the seven elements is modeled and discussed by showing three to four completed digital stories, followed by tutorials in the software used during that weekend's workshop (*Photoshop, Premiere, iMovie*). Participants are expected to arrive the first day with at least a draft of a story script and by the next day return with a script near ready for voice over recording. Adults, being familiar with the intense pace of workshops and having more experience with personal narrative, have handled the CDS model well. Students need more than "Think of an idea for a story. Write it. Then storyboard it." While teachers rarely limit their support for the scripting stage of a project to this mandate, many have ignored the techniques developed by creative writing teachers, oral story coaches, and filmmakers for starting a personal narrative.

### *Story Writing*

Lambert includes the following in the script writing section of *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* (2002):

- Use only the space on a 4 x 6 index card. Write for ten minutes about your story idea. Do not stop until the card is full or ten minutes has passed.
- Respond to the prompt: "When in your life did a decisive moment occur that changed the direction of your life?"
- Draw a map of the neighborhood you grew up in.

Approaches to helping students write a script for a digital story vary with the purpose of the project. A five hundred-word composition on the personal significance of playing the piano is not a useful digital story script, regardless of its quality. When I was half way through my first digital storytelling project with a class of fourth graders, I recognized a

major problem. I had spent two weeks teaching students how to write an opening hook, the power of similes and metaphors, and drawing more and more descriptive detail out of them. I had provided an outline with prompts that structured the beginning, middle and end of the story, and guided them towards identifying what exactly it was about their place that made a difference in their lives. After they revised their drafts two to three times, I felt that I had met my writing objectives for the project. But, now I had stories too long for the three-minute maximum window for a digital story. Fortunately, I only had one student who had written a four-page hour-by-hour composition about his trip to Disney Land. How could I tell this student who had spent hours writing according to my instructions that he would have to cut out most of what he had written? I had to acknowledge my error and allow a longer story. The rest of the class wrote stories that ranged from barely a paragraph to two hundred words.

Despite my best efforts, I had not done much to help prepare my students for the visual aspects of telling a digital story. I had followed a common plan where teachers ask students write a story, then to storyboard it. When the writing process becomes the time where students try to sort out the essential information of who, what, where and how of a story, scripting becomes very difficult. Most importantly, when the student is writing their script without knowing the why of the story, she is like a ship lost at sea. However, some students prefer this exploratory writing approach. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory has demonstrated that a student's linguistic intelligence could be stronger than their visual intelligence (1991). Students should not be limited to the traditional composition model when it comes to writing their scripts. Within every class exists a wide range of narrative skills, intellectual self-awareness, and learning styles. To

accommodate these needs, digital story script writing should extend traditional writing methods to include oral story coaching techniques and visual techniques, such as starting with the images and writing into them.

The “Show - Don’t Tell” mantra often used by writing teachers does not apply to the digital story script in the same way as it does with a composition. You want the student to tell her feelings about the topic and then select images that show the details of the main character and the setting. This reverses how we have typically taught writing/storytelling to students. A recent middle school project successfully adapted a seasoned approach to composition writing to digital story script writing.

*Students wrote their scripts and created their storyboard over a ten day, sixty to ninety-minute session per day. All students were told they would be writing a story about a “change” in their lives. After a whole class brainstorming session and two free writes on the theme, students selected one free write to focus on. Two days were spent writing setting, character and dialogue descriptions for the stories on separate pieces of color-coded paper (red = character, green = dialogue, yellow = setting). These were cut-and-pasted into the free write to make a longer, detailed story. The free write draft had been color-coded with stars to indicate where the character and setting descriptions would go. Students cut the sections from the appropriately color-coded paper and pasted them into the free write. These were photocopied and placed on the left hand side of a legal sized manila folder. On the right side, a blank storyboard was stapled. During the two weeks, students had been instructed to bring in five to seven images that they planned to use in their digital story. The final step involved reading through the copy of their story on the left hand of the folder and drawing a line to a box of the storyboard that had a short description of an image that would REPLACE the writing on the left side. The pared down stories on the left became their scripts for their digital story. The transition to the digital story script was handled by telling students that they would be editing their stories down to approximately 175 words.*

According to one of the instructors, students were thrilled to hear that they only had a 175 word-limit on their stories. The story writing process also had appeared less daunting for students who struggled to elaborate on their setting and character descriptions (see Section 3.6 for additional information on this project). This project is unique in that it is

one of few to adapt the CDS script writing approach to meet the needs of young students, and still maintain a focus on personal narrative.

Traditional composition instruction has relied on a variety of techniques to help the teller focus and structure their story. The same holds true for teachers of digital storytelling. From story prompts to outlines, teachers have provided tools to assist in framing a story. The tools will often match the reading and writing level of the students. One digital storytelling workshop leader used a flip-chart where she displayed five framing questions at each point of a large star. Students each received five index cards to answer the five core questions: who is the main character, what is the setting, what are your feelings at the beginning of the event, what is the main event, and what are your feelings after the main event. In the middle of the star students were instructed to write the first sentence of their story.

Daniel Weinshenker, a CDS associate and artist in Denver, CO, focused on the “change model” when coaching students through the scripting phase. He quotes a favorite writing teacher in describing his approach to the writing of digital stories: “Stories are about one of two things: we go on a vacation or a stranger comes to town. Either something is coming into your life and you’re changing because of it or you’re going somewhere outside of yourself into a new space and that’s changing you. It’s always about change, whether it’s coming in and disturbing your life or you’re going someplace new.” Weinshenker combines this model with story prompts, such as “first time you fell in love” or “first time you felt betrayed by someone.” Semantic webbing exercises similar to Figure 9 and letter writing have also proven effective in his work with teenagers in

alternative high schools. The letter writing is particularly useful in steering students away from explaining their story.

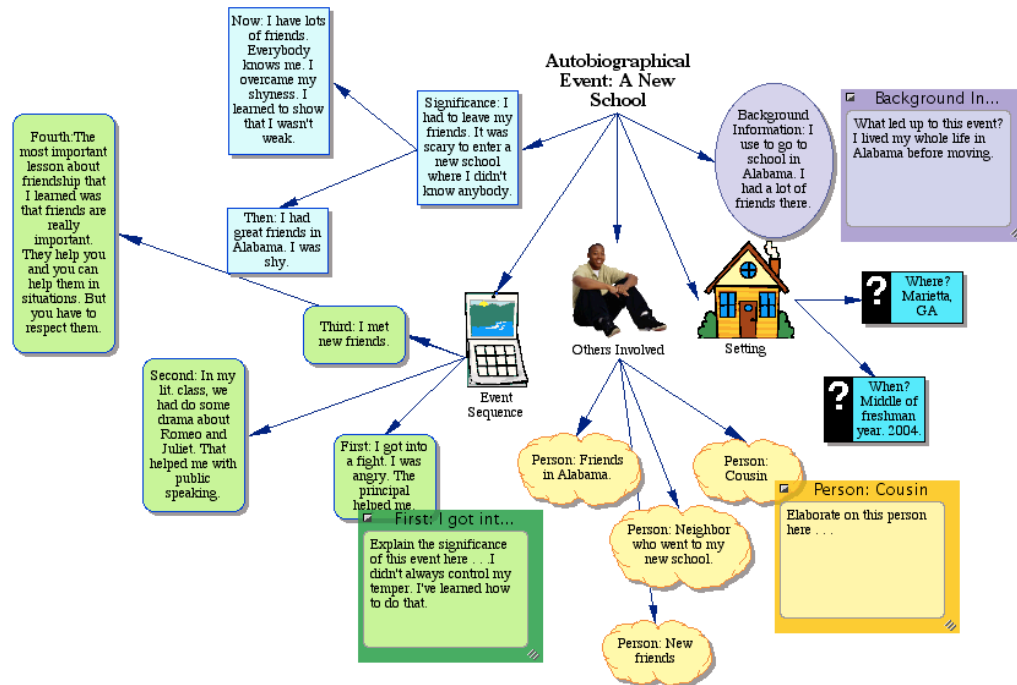


Figure 9: Webbing Example Using Inspiration

Even in digital storytelling approaches that focus on content-area integration, the challenges of modifying writing instruction for a digital story script persist. The instructional technology facilitators, who often assume the difficult role of shepherding both the skeptical and enthusiastic teachers of their buildings through the digital storytelling process, have strived to maintain a focus on quality writing while working with classroom teachers. Two instructional technology facilitators have introduced digital storytelling in several Illinois high schools. Throughout their work, they have stressed to teachers that the quality of the digital story is based on the quality of the writing. Using a

traditional writing process approach, students have revised their stories several times before starting any work on the computer.

### *Story Mapping*

Visualizing the flow of a story has also not been an integral part of the traditional writing process. Primary grade teachers instruct students in diagramming parts of speech in sentences while English teachers later emphasize it by referencing Freitag's triangle (Figure 10).

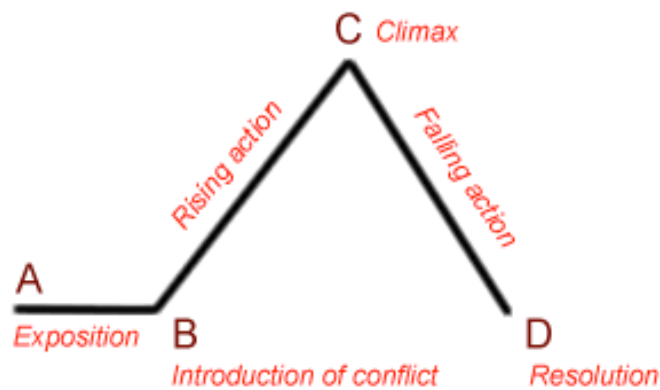


Figure 10: Freitag's Triangle

However, students are rarely expected to apply Freitag's story model. As one teacher stated in his syllabus, "One way to understand the structure of a story is to follow the model of Freitag's triangle. I will never ask you to map out a story using this, but an awareness of it may help you to understand better just what is going on." Because digital storytelling requires the ability to make visual relationships that convey parts of your story, practice in story mapping should be considered an important part of the digital storytelling process. It has particular relevance during the modeling and deconstructing of digital stories that teachers use to show what is expected of students.

Ohler's approach to digital storytelling makes explicit use of visual mapping. He stresses the importance of students having a "visual portrait" of their story (Figure 11). Instead of starting with attempts at a series of structured paragraphs, the story drafting process begins by drawing diagrams, sketches or pictures that provide "a portal into the student's mind" (Ohler 2004). This portal is invaluable to a teacher when coaching students through their stories. It immediately lets you know if students have determined the point of their story. If this is true, then they have completed the most important part of their story and can move onto storyboarding the actual visuals to support the story. A visual portrait of a story (VPS) pulls together ideas generated using a semantic web to illustrate more than just the beginning, middle and end of the story.

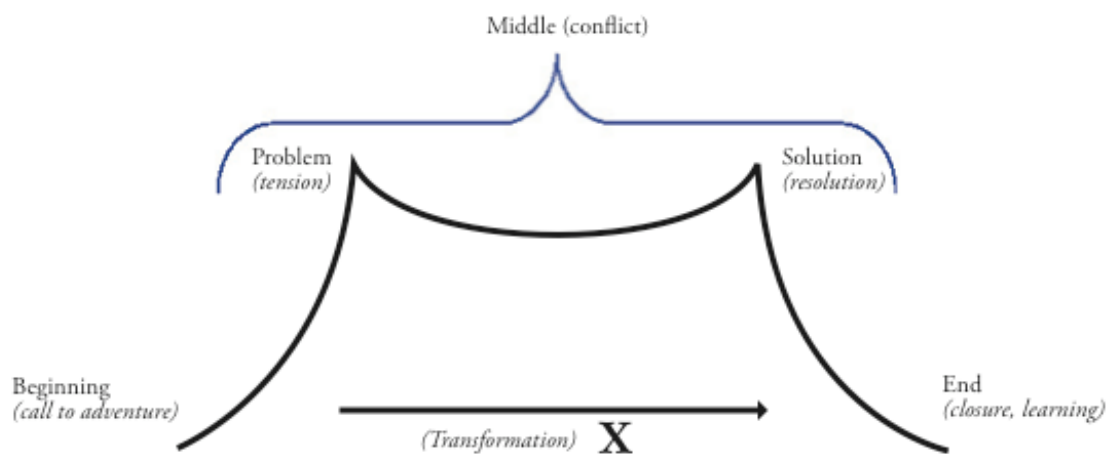


Figure 11: Visual Portrait of a Story (VPS)

Ohler's VPS model, first developed by Brett Dillingham (2001), emphasizes the transformation the main character undergoes to resolve the problem of the story. In contrast to Freytag's triangle, the main character's transformation is what makes a story

satisfying. If the central character does not become wiser, stronger or more mature at the end of the journey, the audience feels cheated. For example, the following story conforms to Freitag's triangle, but not the VPS model: One morning, I wanted to make pancakes for breakfast (A). I did not have any milk (B). While riding my bike to the corner store, my wallet fell out of my pocket and into a huge puddle. All of my money was soaked. I told the clerk at the store what had happened to my wallet and he laughed and told me to pay him the next day for the milk (C). I returned home and enjoyed a large stack of pancakes (D). Figure 12 illustrates transformation in a story using a VPS. Digital stories that lack transformation are often anecdotes or narrated slideshows.

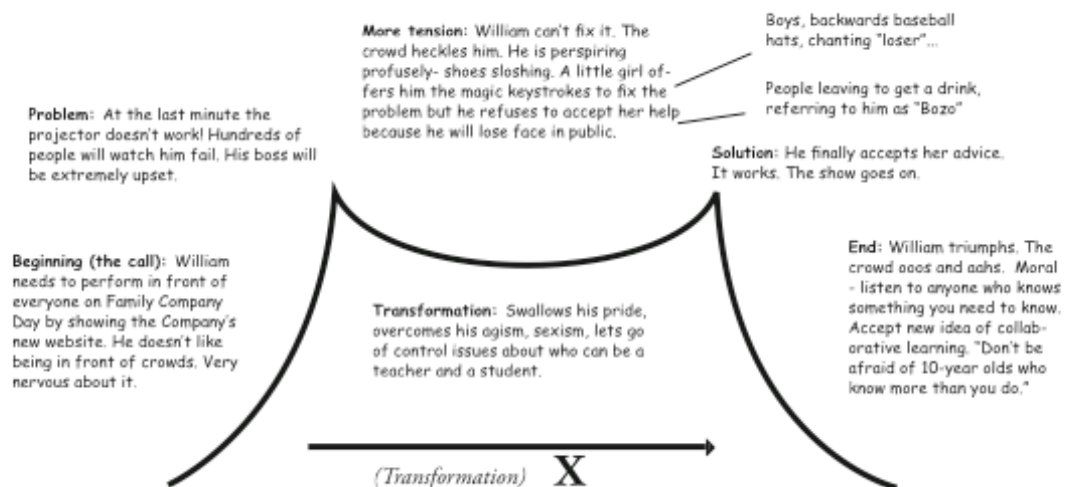


Figure 12: Illustration of Transformation Using VPS

For Ohler, scripting/writing is the fifth step in a nine-step digital storytelling process. Note that Steps 2 and 3 emphasize a visual and oral explanation of the story

before any structured writing takes place, and that Step 6 integrates peer feedback, a form of Lipman's story coaching.

1. Get a story idea
2. Create a story map
3. Pitch it to your teacher and peers
4. Create a storyboard
5. Scripting/Writing
6. Review by peers, teacher
7. Production/post-production – *this is when students get to the computer!*
8. Performance (sharing with audience)
9. Assessment/Improvement

Ed Sheerin, Director of Mars Hill College Digital Storytelling Program, has developed an approach that combines writing with the visualization of the story elements. Using a film analogy, he instructs teachers to think of how the camera perspectives of wide, medium and tight shots correspond to the development of any written piece. A wide or medium shot introduces the subject whereas a tight shot provides detail and supports the subject or theme introduced in the beginning. According to Sheerin, "A storyboard requires students to identify the purpose of the writing and, thus, a natural progression of thought throughout the whole document...Students first see the big picture (the main idea, purpose or theme) and then can break that down into the smaller pieces needed (paragraphs) to best support the story" (2003). For teachers focused on using digital storytelling in a Science, Health, or History class, Sheerin's model effectively structures scripting a story so that students translate their research into their own words and not simply repackage information from a book or website.

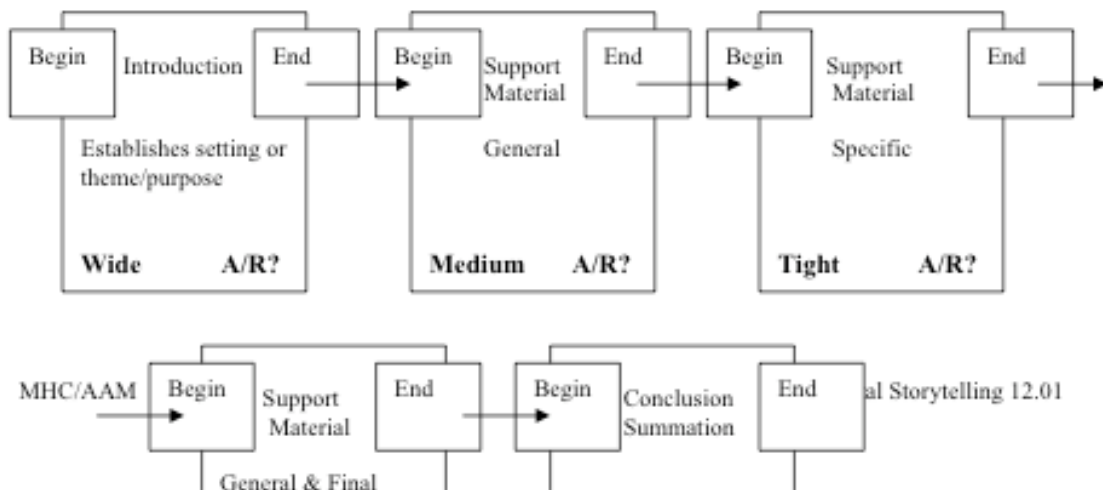


Figure 13: Ed Sheerin's Digital Story Guide

When compared to an illustrated example of Ohler's VPS, you see how both a content-area digital storytelling approach and a personal narrative focused approach both benefit from having a visual map of the story. As Sheerin explains, "Our students have creative minds. Often, our biggest problem is not motivating them to write, but teaching them to stay focused on one central purpose or main idea" (2003).

The visual approach to story scripting is also emphasized by many educators teaching digital storytelling as filmmaking. Marco Torres, a Social Studies teacher and technology director at San Fernando High School, CA, stresses the importance of visualization as a prerequisite to students touching a camera or computer. "I must be able, as a teacher, to sit down and visualize what it is that they're trying to do before I hand them a camera" (2005).

### **3.5 Stage 3: Teaching Elements of Effective Digital Storytelling**

The above section introduced three general profiles of approaches to digital story script writing. Regardless of the approach, teaching effective digital storytelling encompasses three skill domains:

1. Story – Is it a digital story, a slideshow or a loose regurgitation of facts?
2. Visual/Media – Do media elements enhance the story’s main idea?
3. Technical – Can the student locate image or audio files, and import them into the computer? Edit and reformat images and audio?

Depending on the age of the students, these three domains present over fifty individual skills that must be taught either directly or indirectly by the teacher or collaboratively with students acting as teachers.

#### **Overemphasis on Modeling**

Using a model to exhibit an anticipated end product and its corresponding expectations is common teaching practice. The problem with modeling is that the teacher assumes students will be able to infer the corresponding steps and emulate the model with little difficulty. In digital storytelling, showing and discussing a particularly effective digital story often becomes the primary means of teaching the elements of effective digital storytelling. While modeling is very effective in engaging students in thinking about the steps of the project, it should not be the only means of teaching. The practice of showing a model digital story (often made by an adult) as the main instruction tool of the project is a common pitfall among teachers getting started with digital storytelling in the classroom. When I am done reading the latest Harry Potter novel, I do not feel that I now possess the skills to write something like J.K. Rowling. When I walk out of the movie

theater I do not feel that I now know how to script, shoot, edit and record audio for a feature film. There are a number of essential skills involved in creating a digital story that require explicit teaching, such as how to set up a dramatic question or develop tension. Within the visual/media skill domain, students need to know how to sequence images so that they convey a particular meaning or use music to set the tone of a story. These skills demand more time than a few minutes of discussion after viewing a model digital story. Oral explanations of most things technology related often result in a poor transfer of knowledge.

Showing is not teaching. However, when teachers model a digital story in the context of teaching story, this yields something much more beneficial. One approach used by a middle school project included a story swap of either a written or digital story at the beginning of each session. On the second day, after a digital story was shown, students were asked:

- *How was the digital story different than the written story?*
- *Why did I choose the images I did for the story?*
- *Which of the images illustrated the word I said exactly?*
- *Which images were symbols for what I was saying?*
- *Why was this an important story to tell other people?*
- *What was the conflict or problem in the story?*

During that same class period, students began adding detail to their first drafts. Pairing the modeling with the in-class time to develop their stories increased the chance that students would apply some of the ideas introduced during the discussion. As one teacher put it, “We can’t expect students to pick story up through osmosis.”

Figure 14 is from a digital story I created about my cultural identity. In showing the digital story to students and asking for an explanation on why I chose to fill a silhouette of myself with text, I received only blank stares. I rephrased the question to directly

address the symbolism of the text representing my cultural identity: *How is my use of text different from having my script say “My background is made up of my interests in storytelling, teaching, writing, etc?”* Still blank stares.



Figure 14: Screenshot from “*That Question*” Digital Story

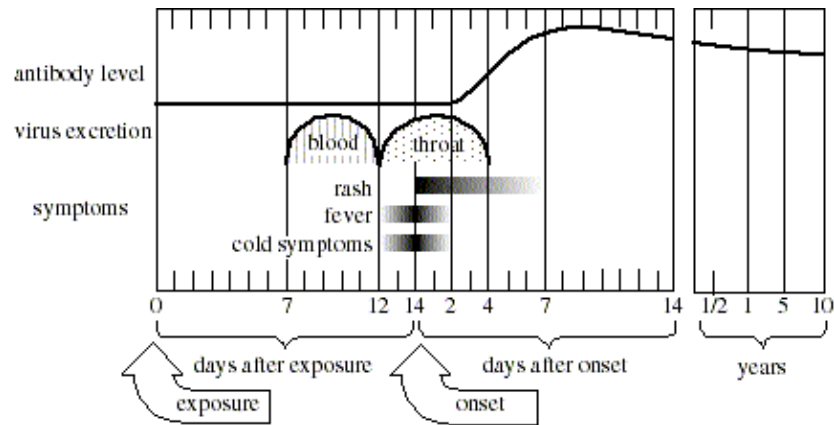
During modeling, teachers should remember that most students are still making literal connections between images and their meaning. For example, when selecting images for a digital story about ice skating, a student might choose a picture of a pair of ice skates to feature in the opening scene, regardless if they belong to the author or have special significance.

Due to a lack of media literacy instruction in schools, deconstruction of media is another skill that is introduced during a digital storytelling project. Teachers are relying on critical thinking skills that most students do not possess. Students' daily lives are immersed in media, yet within a school environment the opportunities for exploring how media messages are constructed are rare. In every digital storytelling workshop where I have discussed a model digital story with students, I have been consistently stunned by two things: students' inability to tell me why a particular image works well in a story, and the lack of transfer of visual and media concepts from the modeling and discussion. These facts confirm for me that students need time to practice and apply the concepts related to visually representing information and conceptualizing the visual flow of a story. When we teach students two digit-multiplication, we provide plenty of practice in applying the concepts of regrouping and place value. Learning digital storytelling should not become as didactic as completing a worksheet on identifying visual relationships, but helping students understand basic visual design principles and how media can be manipulated to alter its message is the responsibility of the digital storytelling teacher.

### **Visual Literacy**

Visual literacy is defined by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) as the ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21<sup>st</sup> century media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning (NCREL 2004). To pass the Science section of many standardized tests, a student need not recall formulas, concepts or vocabulary. Students need to be able to critically read information presented visually. In Figure 15, the student could possess no actual Science knowledge and answer the following question:

1. On Day 10 after exposure to measles, one could conclude that the greatest concentration of the measles virus would most likely be found in which of the following locations?



- A. Cold
- B. Mouth
- C. Blood
- D. Throat

Figure 15: Virology in Health Care  
(adapted from D. M. McLean ©1980 by Williams & Wilkins)

The correct answer of (C) is a simple exercise in reading a basic chart. Unfortunately, the teaching of visual literacy, like media literacy, has always been someone else's responsibility. The bulk of most students' visual literacy takes place in elementary school when perspective drawing is taught. If students are lucky to take an art elective in high school they then receive exposure to basic design principles. Mary Alice White, researcher, Columbia Teacher's College said, "Young people learn more than half of what they know from visual information, but few schools have an explicit curriculum to show students how to think critically about visual data" (Lightbody 2004).

Table 6: Students Who Are Visually Literate

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><i>Have Working Knowledge of Visuals Produced or Displayed through Electronic Media</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand basic elements of visual design, technique, and media.</li> <li>• Are aware of emotional, psychological, physiological, and cognitive influences in perceptions of visuals.</li> <li>• Comprehend representational, explanatory, abstract, and symbolic images.</li> </ul> | <p><i>Apply Knowledge of Visuals in Electronic Media</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are informed viewers, critics, and consumers of visual information.</li> <li>• Are knowledgeable designers, composers, and producers of visual information.</li> <li>• Are effective visual communicators.</li> <li>• Are expressive, innovative visual thinkers and successful problem solvers.</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

While acknowledged by many, few digital storytelling approaches have directly addressed the visual literacy needs of students. One teacher commented that, “Without visual literacy, you get slideshows.” Table 6 illustrates the important relationship between visual literacy and creating effective digital stories.

### 3.6 Stage 4: Managing the Technology

A digital storytelling project where each student in a class of twenty develops her own story is near impossible to manage for one person. The basic five steps of creating a digital story—write script, collect and/or create accompanying visuals, import images into the computer, record voice over, and then edit everything into a cohesive sequence—can be enormously overwhelming for even the most skilled technology teacher. When viewed as a continuum of skills, the spectrum of a digital story is comprised of over fifty discrete

measurable skills. The process can be simplified when the main objective is focused on the storytelling and not concerned with students acquiring technical skills, such as scanning. The following project has developed a streamlined approach that demonstrates the benefit of stripping away tasks non-essential to story development and structuring the project so that most of the students' class time is spent working on their story.

*Over a two-week period, teachers worked with 7<sup>th</sup> grade students on stories using the familiar "change" theme (lost pet, getting in a fight, moving to a new country, death of a grandparent) guiding them through the writing process, emphasizing character and setting description. During this first half of the project, students were instructed to draw pictures and make a list of possible images that they planned to use. Teachers took digital pictures of the students to be later used as establishing shots in the students' stories. Each student also wrote down three sound effects that they planned to use. Their stories were stapled to the left side of a legal sized manila folder with a blank storyboard on the right side. Students drew lines from parts of their script to the corresponding descriptions of intended images on the storyboard boxes. In between the end of the writing half of the project and the start of the digital half, staff and adult volunteers typed the students' stories, downloaded their sound effects, scanned their images and set-up a folder with their images and sound effects on the laptop that the student would use. When the second half began, students could immediately get to work on their digital story because half of their content was already on the computer. Students were able to use their own images during introductory lessons in iMovie.*

Time is never a teacher's ally. The first digital storytelling project I undertook began in February and took until the last day of school to complete. I had had two iMovie-equipped computers in the classroom, one scanner, a digital camera and camcorder, and twenty-four fourth graders. Aside from the voice over recording, which consumes the most project time, finding, drawing, scanning and importing images for students' stories was the source of a lot of wasted time. Students had brought in two to three photographs from home then turned to the Internet for images. Their lack of media literacy skills became apparent when they chose images with weak connections to their stories.

The middle school project above suggests a method for collapsing the time span of a project by making the media elements readily available to students. Royalty free music, clip art and image CD-ROMs, and multimedia kits that combine photos, video and audio clips and documents specific to a theme, such as Japanese Internment have been used by teachers to enable students to immediately start developing their stories and not be concerned with access issues to media material (Orange County Department of Education 2005). Some may argue that pre-packaged story content leads to cookie-cutter stories, but if the focus is on developing students' story skills then teachers need to use whatever makes their job easier.

### **3.7 Stage 5: Assessment, Sharing, and Distribution**

*Technology is used for many different types of assignment. The type of assignments expected by the teacher establishes the cognitive task as well as the scope of learning possible for students. Many students will NOT score well...because the purpose of the assignment either utilized technology for its own sake or lacked expectations/guidance for students to create an information product. (Porter 2001)*

Assessment of digital storytelling can be viewed from three perspectives: 1) demonstration of writing, research and technical computer skills 2) demonstration of story, visual, media and technical literacies (digital literacy) and 3) personal development. The first perspective, which emphasizes state standards and tool literacy, is most common to classroom uses of digital storytelling. Several issues complicate accurate assessment of project-based learning, especially projects that involve media production. As discussed earlier in Stage 1: Planning/Logistics, teachers with clear learning goals will avoid subjective assessments and produce engaging digital stories

instead of narrated slideshows. When teachers reach the Assessment Stage of a project, the following questions should have been addressed in the Planning/Logistics Stage:

- What specific learning goals will the student's digital story reflect?
- What is the purpose of implementing digital storytelling with the class?
- What are the factors that influence the context of the project (location where stories will be worked on, relevance of project-theme to students)?
- What do you consider to be developmentally appropriate to expect of your students' personal narrative, visual media and computer skills?
- How important is the role of identity construction to you as a teacher helping students produce a personal narrative?

### **Subjective Assessment**

When assessing digital storytelling, subjective grading occurs when teachers do not teach the actual skills and concepts they include in their rubric. Adding to this issue is the extensive time teachers invest in a multimedia project. When the end product does not meet teachers' expectations and appears to be a huge waste of class time, teachers are reluctant to assess the effectiveness of their teaching.

### **Context and Purpose**

Every digital storytelling project takes place under a different set of circumstances that have significant influence on the outcome. These can be subtle (ratio of boys to girls in the class) or more explicit (the setting and students are part of a Middle East student exchange program held in the US). The contributing context of my Place Story project was not evident to my students. To them, the main objective was to receive a high grade. They had no idea that they were contributing to a collective narrative about their shared worlds. If they had, perhaps, they would have understood why they were doing the project, and that would have created an authentic purpose for writing their story.

Developmentally this was beyond their fourth grade grasp and could not shape the script writing process.

A summer workshop conducted in 2002 by Communities History by Youth in the Middle East (CHYME) illustrates how context influences the digital storytelling process. Ten students from Jordan and Israel each created a digital story about the conflict in the Middle East with the help of Natasha Freidus and a local community access television. The workshop was held on the campus of Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. All of their stories were driven by the context of their shared history and on-going efforts to find peace among their countries. This explicit goal was understood by all of the students. In the case of the Place Story project, students did not see their role in creating a story that could possibly improve understanding between suburban and urban students.

The context of most digital storytelling projects is not always so charged as the CHYME project. Many teachers have implemented digital storytelling in the mainstream classroom as a way for students to respond to a study of WWII or another curriculum area. In these approaches, the context shifts from the emphasis on personal narrative to the representation of curriculum content. The issue of context is tied to the purpose of the digital storytelling project. Within the CDS model, the purpose is connected more to the cultural context of having students fulfill the universal human desire to tell story. The content-driven approach is often about meeting a state writing or technology standard. A successful balance can be struck between the two.

*A fifth grade teacher needed to cover Immigration as part of the Social Studies curriculum. Their required reading anthology had a unit on adapting to new places. Students were instructed to create digital stories based upon the theme of adapting to new surroundings, peers, or situations. Student stories were expected to include lessons extracted from studying immigration to the United States as a way to enrich their story. Throughout their study of Immigration, students were prompted to make connections to their lives. These provided valuable springboards and an authentic purpose for writing that many students benefited from when it came time to write their first drafts. These written reflections were elaborated via the students' accustomed writing process that emphasized focus, clarity and sensory detail. Effective first person writing that used technology in an innovative way to represent what the student had learned in a core content area was the teacher's primary objective.*

Essentially, this is the “Change” theme that is most often used with students when introducing digital storytelling. The difference is that the context of the project is altered to emphasize a content area goal, while still retaining the expectation of a coherent first person narrative. The Social Studies content drives the project, but does not occlude the importance of representing a student's individual voice in a digital storytelling project. The “ability to compare and discriminate ideas from several areas, relate knowledge from several areas” and “compare and discriminate between ideas” as represented in this approach, rank highest among Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom 1956). This type of critical thinking in digital storytelling is squandered when projects are limited to repackaging information rather than asking, “What does this information mean to you?” and “How can you respond to it in story form?”

Consider the work of the Adventure of the American Mind (AAM) program to illustrate how a shift in purpose affects the possible learning outcomes of a digital storytelling project.

*A school district has partnered with the Library of Congress. The LOC has digitized much of its holdings and makes them available to teachers for use in digital storytelling and the support of using primary sources in the classroom. Teachers receive training in a modified version of the CDS model of digital storytelling and*

*the necessary computer equipment and software. They keep the laptop and digital camera that they use during the training. The modified approach replaces the personal narrative thread with an emphasis on an informative structured five-paragraph “story” using primary sources to teach content objectives. Teachers return to their classrooms and create stories, such as introducing the historical background of a book to be studied. Students create stories, such as sharing research on the origin of the pledge of allegiance or how-to stories.*

The danger in such an approach is of students falling into the slideshow trap and producing a presentation, albeit an informative one. When the “personal” is removed from the first person narrative in the digital storytelling process, the line between digital story and *Powerpoint* presentation becomes very thin. What is the value in using more difficult to learn video-editing software when the same project could be accomplished with an easier tool? While the integration of primary sources in a document represents higher-ordered thinking skills comparable to synthesizing personal experience with historical events (Bloom 1956), the loss of the student’s personal voice dilutes the digital storytelling experience.

My purpose is not to undermine any approach to digital storytelling that strays from the CDS model. Sheerin’s approach has been used by hundreds of teachers to successfully meet state writing standards and engage thousands of students in using authentic primary sources to learn not only core content. It has also addressed the ignored media and visual literacy skills. The AAM K-12 workshops teach and provide resources in using and analyzing video, maps, manuscripts, sound clips, and photographs in the classroom. The AAM program supports half of my proposed solution to addressing the visual and media literacies required of effective digital storytellers by providing accessible, quality resources for teaching these necessary skills. Their philosophy appears to be that if you train and equip teachers with not only the technology but also the

relevant raw material to develop innovative lessons, teachers will meet the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills called for by educational reformers.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Expectations**

The practice of digital storytelling began with adults as its target audience. The stories are often very personal in nature and reflect a mature sense of identity. Asking pre-teen and adolescents to synthesize personal experience and express it in narrative form raises important questions about what is developmentally appropriate to expect of students' personal narrative writing and of the complex visual literacy skills required on the digital end of the process. I make note of this not to suggest that digital storytelling is only appropriate with mature students who have strong visual and media skills, but rather to highlight how the wide cognitive and affective range of students could easily invalidate an assessment rubric. Also, I want to draw attention to how creating a digital story is more than a vehicle to improve student writing. To illustrate the thorny issues hidden in assessing a digital story, consider the Place Story project I implemented with my former fourth grade class.

In each of their stories I was looking for two things: 1) clear evidence of the significance of the place to the student and 2) the application of most of the seven elements of an effective digital story that I had modeled for them. These two areas encompass a broad range of abilities and assume that students have already attained what Piaget referred to as the formal operational stage of child development. At this stage, adolescents possess the ability to express abstract concepts through the logical use of symbols. I argue that the Place themed digital stories represented the manipulation of symbols (text, image, audio) to express the abstract relationship that the student held with

the place. However, studies have shown that not all children will progress to the level of formal operations.

Data from adult populations provides...between 30 to 35% of adults attain the cognitive development stage of formal operations (Kuhn, Langer, Kohlberg & Haan, 1977). For formal operations, it appears that maturation establishes the basis, but a special environment is required for most adolescents and adults to attain this stage. (Bruner 1966)

The status of a student's personal and social development has a large impact on creating a digital story. Piaget said, "Discovery learning and supporting the developing interests of the child are two primary instructional techniques. It is recommended that parents and teachers challenge the child's abilities, but NOT present material or information that is too far beyond the child's level." Vygotsky may have granted the Place Story project more leeway as it could have been viewed as an excellent vehicle for supporting the type of social interaction that fueled a child's "zone of proximal development" (1978). However, Vygotsky's main principle that a child's cognitive development is limited to a certain range at any given age (1978) underscores my point that not all students will possess the skills to synthesize their personal experience with their digital skills. Some students in the class will tell a simple story about what it was like to move to the United States while others will be able to draw on a more developed sense of self and craft a story about the importance of music in their life.

The ability to self-identify is a large part of personal narrative writing. Rubrics used to assess student-produced digital stories maybe looking for this, but do not make self-identification an explicit criteria. Afterall, you cannot force a student to self-identify.

For the Place Story project, the following rubric was applied to the completed digital stories with each criteria being scored on a scale of 1 to 10:

**Script**

- Story has a clear beginning, middle and end
- Story uses an engaging hook (does not start with this “This is my place.”)
- Details are included throughout

**Visuals**

- Images/video go with the story
- Sufficient images

**Editing**

- Voice over is free of silent spaces
- No gaps in viewing
- Music, effects, and transitions used effectively

This first attempt at a rubric for digital storytelling with students had many flaws. First, the Yes or No style questions are at odds with a scaled assessment tool. The second most glaring problem is the lumping together of Music, Effects and Transitions along with the subjective phrase “used effectively.” The fact that I did not separate these elements into individual criterion indicates the small amount of time I spent on teaching how each of these elements impacted the quality of the story. Third, nowhere in the rubric is it communicated to the student that I was looking for clear evidence of the personal significance of their place. Regardless of the fact that I hammered this point verbally in my discussion of their stories, the rubric made no mention of this vital point. The result: two out of the twenty student digital stories effectively communicated the significance of their place. In accordance with Piaget, these two students were clearly at the formal operational level, while their peers were appropriately at the previous concrete operational level.

I was disappointed in the disparity of the stories, but could not readily admit my role in contributing to the short-comings of the project. I took solace in seeing my latent

function for the project realized. Students were finding common ground after viewing and discussing each other's important places. Taking an honest assessment of the quality of one's teaching methods during a project that consumes a large amount of class time is not common practice, especially in the current high-stakes testing era.

Teaching story is not like teaching punctuation. It requires practice and a variety of approaches. Long division is a perfect example of a historically complex process for students to acquire that is introduced in fourth grade and taught repeatedly over the next few years. You would not expect a typical fourth grader to solve:  $4 - 3i / -4 + 3i$ , nor should I have expected all of my students to surge past their egocentric stage and write a story that illustrated a very abstract relationship. For the student still figuring out how to write a decent book report, writing a strong personally developed digital story script is comparable to expecting them to write a five-paragraph essay. Again, this is not to say that digital storytelling is only applicable with sophisticated writers. It is often most engaging for the reluctant writer because for the first time the student controls the flow of the information. My emphasis is on the teacher having realistic expectations when she creates and conveys her assessment standards for the students. I view digital storytelling as a tool for teaching story. I do not expect all students to have strong story, visual and media skills before or by the end of a project.

While my academic goal for the Place Story project was to improve the students' writing skills, I also wanted to improve their storytelling skills. Improving students' story skills has not always been viewed as the purpose of writing instruction in school. As discussed in Chapter 1, writing in schools has largely been practiced in the context of responding to literature. Opportunities for first person story creation have been rare. For

many students, when instructed to write a story about themselves, it is still an emerging skill that demands instruction. From elementary grades to high school, each time I have introduced digital storytelling to a group of students and asked them to write a story about themselves, the task has been foreign to them.

Accurate expectations of students' visual and media skills are also an important part of a digital storytelling project. If a student has had no experience in creating a slideshow or cutting out pictures from a magazine for a collage then asking her to create, locate, import and sequence a set of images that convincingly supports a narrative is a challenging task. This is where the absence of visual and media literacy in US schools demonstrates how unprepared students are for a future awash in media messages. Conducting a pre-assessment of students' visual and media skills prior to the start of the project provides a base of the students' skills to measure against during the assessment stage.

### **Identity Construction**

For the 4<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade teacher introducing digital storytelling to students, the many philosophical and psychological theories on narrativity provide little practical guidance. However, Galen Strawson's summary of several popular views on narrative highlights the unacknowledged influence of identity construction in the digital storytelling process:

"Self is a perpetually rewritten story", according to the psychologist Jerry Bruner: we are all constantly engaged in "self-making narrative" and "in the end we become the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives". Oliver Sacks concurs: each of us "constructs and lives a 'narrative' [and] this narrative is us, our identities". Marya Schechtman, a philosopher says a person, "creates his identity [only] by forming an autobiographical narrative – a story of his life". One must possess a full and "explicit narrative [of one's life] to develop fully as a person". Charles Taylor claims that a "basic condition of making sense of ourselves is that we grasp our lives in a narrative" and have an understanding of our lives "as an

unfolding story.” ...[that] we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form, as a “quest” [and] must see our lives in story. (Strawson 2004

One of the many social subtexts affecting all learning environments is the question of “Will my name be shouted out?” (O’Connor 2001). Digital stories in grades 4 through 12 range from stories about a broken tooth to the loss of a pet to a favorite video game to teen isolation and depression. Content-driven documentary style digital stories are still an exercise in narrating self, but they reduce the scope of authoring one’s voice and the power of adding it to a school community. A well-crafted digital story about a community’s increasing gentrification and a student’s corresponding response to it is an important civics lesson that meets many measurable writing and technology goals. But when compared to a digital story about loneliness created by the student in the class who has not spoken a word to anyone all year, the digital story becomes a vehicle for providing the volume that this particular student’s voice needed. In the wake of the Columbine tragedy, everyone wondered what could have prevented such an event. Perhaps schools that provide opportunities for creating and sharing students’ stories would be a valuable pro-active outlet.

The creation of a digital story is undeniably a powerful form of identity construction. Although many teachers cite a boost in students’ self-esteem after a digital storytelling project, the critical link between media production and development of self, as well as literacy, has not been a majority concern within education. Hull and colleagues from the University of California, Berkeley worked closely with the students in DUSTY after-school program. DUSTY follows the CDS model, which holds true many of the narrative beliefs that Strawson encapsulated. “The ability to render one’s world as

changeable and oneself as agent able to direct that change is integrally linked to acts of self-representation through writing, as Freire taught us long ago, and through other semiotic systems” (Hull 2003). While these are at odds with the narrow expectations of test centric schools, a teacher need only acknowledge the role of identity construction in creating a digital story to exponentially broaden the impact of the project. A teacher whose sole purpose for having students create personal narratives only to receive a grade has missed the main idea of digital storytelling

A similar study of digital storytelling’s potential for authoring identity was conducted by Alan Davis, University of Colorado at Denver (2005). As with DUSTY, Cyber Cougars is a university partnered after-school program providing area teens with options to explore technology alongside skilled peers and adults. Weinshenker, a CDS associate, introduced digital storytelling with support from three Cyber Cougars staff members. Davis concluded that creating a personal narrative “can serve as a cognitive tool for development” and viewed the completed digital story as an “object” that facilitated identity construction. It was also observed that students were quick to realize what exactly the adults were seeking in their personal stories and manufactured stories that they then were under the pressure to live up to (Davis 2004).

Digital storytelling is an example of project-based learning where teachers are still responsible for teaching a set of core skills. It is important to consider students’ social development when expecting them to write and share personal narrative. Equally important is a pre-assessment of the technical skills of the students. This does not always take place in multimedia-based projects. Students are often plopped down in front of computers and it is expected the teacher’s job is done.

An effective approach to digital storytelling in schools provides students with *multi-*media story practice prior to, during and after a digital storytelling project. The work of oral storytellers and story coaches, writing workshop teachers, photography and art teachers, cartoonists and media literacy researchers all can be consulted to address the challenges of developing students' personal narrative skills. When students have received adequate instruction in the story, visual and media literacy skills needed to create a digital story, non-subjective assessments can be made of the students' stories.

## CHAPTER 4 SOLUTION

*“Education as simply a way of storing facts isn’t significant. Instead, we need to teach students how to tell a story.” (Lucas 2004)*

In *Graphic Storytelling*, Will Eisner argues that story needs to be taught regardless of the medium. He states, “All stories have a structure. A story has a beginning, an end, and a thread of events laid upon a framework that holds it together. Whether the medium is text, film or comics, the skeleton is the same. The style and manner of its telling may be influenced by the medium but the story itself abides” (1996). Students attempting to create a digital story without this fundamental understanding will more than likely only create a slideshow. In this chapter, I illustrate my proposed solution to the issues challenging digital storytelling in education in the context of the typical five stages of a digital storytelling project.

My proposed solution incorporates Davis’ braided cable approach to language development (Figure 16). From his years of experience as an author and performer of stories for children and adults, he developed the braided cable metaphor to help teachers “thaw frozen writers” (2000). The four strands of the cable are as follows: 1) observational competence 2) imitation of what has been observed 3) beginning to read, mechanics of writing and 4) creative writing are not intended as a strict set of procedures to follow for completing a project. Davis warns that, “We are *not* looking at sequentially attained and then abandoned steps, but rather at added dimensions that must always be maintained” (2000). This is the philosophy that I apply to developing students’ digital

storytelling skills. While I have used the context of the five stages of a typical digital storytelling project to illustrate my solution, it my hope that teachers will see the relevance of developing students’ oral, written, and visual communication skills across the curriculum.

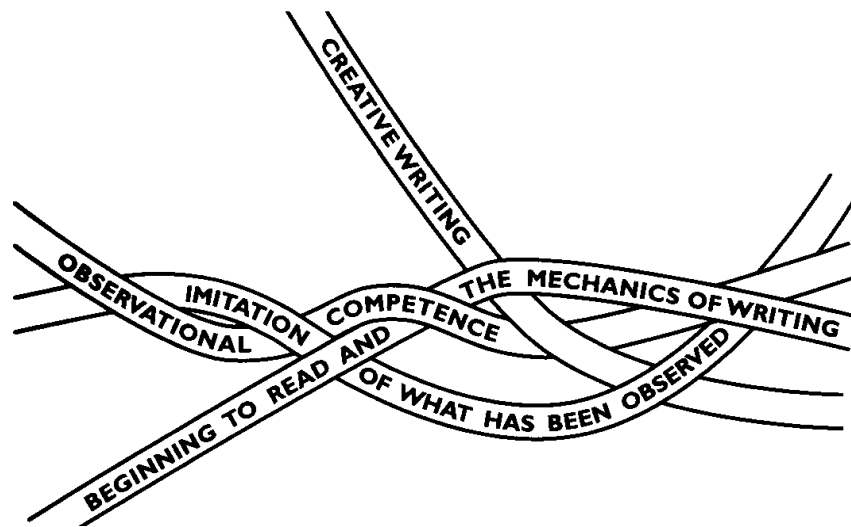


Figure 16: Braided Language Cable

Donald Davis. *Writing as a Second Language: From Experience to Story to Prose* (2000)

For an effective approach to digital storytelling with students, I have modified Davis’ cable to reflect the needs of the student digital storyteller. The first two strands: observational competence and imitation of what has been observed remain intact. Davis focuses on emphasizing the need to extend opportunities for students to hear stories performed or read aloud as the core strand that each additional strand supports and extends. I add that students not only acquire competence in carefully analyzing oral and print stories, but also in graphic novels, television shows, music videos and movies.

Students are surrounded by story and often try to imitate these forms when they first gain access to non-linear video editing equipment. Their imitations often lack a sense of story because they have not been viewing them with story in mind.

#### **4.1 Stage 1 Planning/Logistics**

##### *Scenario*

For the purposes of applying my solution, I have created the following scenario: I am a high school media teacher of a class that meets three times a week for ninety-minute periods. This type of block scheduling, that many high schools have adopted, supports project-based learning.

In 1994, proponents of block scheduling, Edward Seifert (a Professor of Education Administration at Texas A and M University) and John Beck (a Dean of the College of Education at Southwest Texas State University) studied the relationship between block scheduling and the quality of instructional time. They found that “the lengthened classes [used in block scheduling] increased the amount of high-quality instructional time because teachers spent less time on procedures, routines, and management. (Queen 2001)

The class is heterogeneously grouped and has twenty students in the class.. This urban public high school is equipped with a twenty-five-station computer lab and portable cart of twenty iBooks that teachers sign-up to use in their classrooms.

##### *Identify Learning Goals, Core Curriculum Integration, Required Skills and Concepts*

My primary goal of introducing students to digital storytelling is to provide an engaging and authentic purpose for writing. Secondary objectives are: 1) effective use of visual and media elements to support personal narrative and 2) combining storytelling and technology to represent student voices in an effort to cultivate a sense of community. The secondary objective will be important as trust and respect will be a large part of group projects later in the school year. In this scenario, this is the first project of the year.

Using the Change theme, my hope is that students' stories will represent their individual voices and introduce them to one another. I am collaborating with an English teacher to support a unit on memoir. We are both teaching story. My role is not limited to being the "technology teacher." Skills and concepts, such as using dialogue and adding tension to a story will be reinforced in both classes. Following the planned approach to the project, I have created a digital story of my own, as well as the collaborating English teacher. Based on our experiences of creating our digital stories and review of several past student-produced digital stories, we will use a rubric that assesses the following three areas:

- Story/Script
- Visual/Media Integration
- Technical

Based on the rubric, we will create lessons that address each of the skills and concepts expected of students.

#### *Pre-assessment*

Prior to introducing the project, I have surveyed the students' comfort and skill level with navigating a computer, the school's network, the Internet and their use of peripherals, such as digital cameras. Using Haven's "Is It a Story Yet?" and other short story exercises, I have gauged the class' understanding of basic story structure. Through a brief image exercise, I have determined the students' ability to interpret and create visual relationships. The data from these pre-assessments will be used to adjust the scope of lessons on using media in a digital story. For example, if the surveys represent an

advanced understanding of visual relationships, students may be encouraged to use video clips in their stories.

#### *Recruit Volunteers, Delegate Parts of Project*

As poet John Donne said, “No man is an island.” I have recruited a parent volunteer and an English teacher to help record voice-overs and scan images. This is often the most time-consuming part of the project and cannot be accomplished with only one person.

#### **4.2 Stage 2: Story Drafting/Scripting**

*When students are shown to better visualize their story, and how to better understand the anatomy of a story, they automatically choose more powerful, accurate, dynamic descriptive words. All students are replete with imagination and creativity. What they need to better understand is the form of the story, so that they can successfully apply their imagination and creativity to this unique structure.*  
(Haven 2000)

Incorporating moving images, text and audio is new to personal narrative writing. Many talented teachers have developed a collection of lessons on teaching personal narrative writing that employ photography, music and other media in addition to composition methods. All of this has been created long before digital media production became popular in schools. But within classroom uses of digital storytelling, the overwhelming approach to scripting the personal narrative has relied on traditional composition methods.

The work of traditional oral storytellers and photo essayists has largely been ignored in helping students meet the challenges of writing a personal narrative. To introduce the project, I present the digital stories created by the English teacher and myself. By making ourselves vulnerable, I hope to increase students’ comfort level with

personal narrative. We compare the digital stories to a *Powerpoint* presentation or a multimedia report that students might be familiar with from past grades. We also show a narrated slideshow version of one of our digital stories that lacks basic story structure, pointing out its much less engaging results. By the end of the discussion, students should be able to define the purpose of a digital story as sharing a lesson learned (4<sup>th</sup> element in Ohler's definition of story) vs. a multimedia report that aims to inform.

Students need to be able to identify the basic elements of a story and work from the same definition of story. As Ohler points out, story could mean everything from the story a news reporter relays from the scene of an accident to the story someone uses to explain why they are late to the stories referred to as the floors of a building (2004). Using Ohler's definition, I explain that the type of story we are concerned with in our Change themed stories contains these five elements:

1. a beginning that introduces a conflict the main character must deal with
2. a presence of tension developed by steps taken to resolve the conflict
3. transformation of central character
4. the reader is able to transform and learn new things along with central character
5. an end or closure, not necessarily a happy ending

(adapted from *Telling Your Story* 2004)

Freitag's triangle and the Virtual Portrait of a Story, introduced in Chapter 3, are applied to the teacher digital stories to illustrate story structure in context. Mapping of personal narratives is extended during Stage 3: Teaching Elements of a Digital Story. The traits of an effective personal narrative have not changed with the introduction of digital media to the storytelling process. Students are told that their scripts should contain the following characteristics:

- focuses on one experience
- shows the purpose clearly in that the importance of the event is clear to the reader
- expresses the writer's thoughts and feelings throughout
- is written in first person "I"
- has relevant sensory details (things for the reader to see, hear, feel, smell, taste)
- dialogue is encouraged
- must have why it is important and/or how it affected the writer

These traits are covered in more detail during the English teacher's memoir unit.

The bulk of students' experience with personal narrative consists of the few times they are assigned to write an autobiography or personal essay. Many graduate from high school without ever having been asked to write a story about themselves. In my solution scenario, the collaborating English teacher is following a unit outline like this one from the Michigan public schools core curriculum:

In this unit students learn how to write a personal narrative. To understand the unique characteristics of a personal narrative, (e.g., autobiographical topic, conversational tone, detailed descriptions, use of writer's feelings), they read or listen to a variety of narratives. Through the examination of these works, they identify characteristics of a personal narrative and use them as a prewriting guide for drafting their first personal narrative. Once they have completed their drafts, students use small writing groups to discuss strategies for revising the drafts. As students review additional examples of personal narratives, they continue to revise their list of characteristics. They revise their prewriting guide and draft their second personal narrative. Students again use appropriate steps of the writing process to plan, draft, revise, and edit their second narrative. Finally, students adapt their second narrative for a story-telling event for their classmates.

(<http://www.michigan.gov/scope>)

Students are told that writing a story is a complex process, but that it can be approached from a variety of paths. Over the course of a few weeks, techniques from professional oral storytellers, authors and photographers are used to help them transfer their story from their heads out onto paper, and then onto the screen. A brief overview of the five stages of creating a digital story lets students know how long the project will run

and when due dates have been set for completing their scripts and collecting images and other media for use in their stories.

The project is explained as consisting of two parts: Story and Visuals. In the first half, students concentrate on adhering to the traits of a personal narrative and applying story maps, such as Freitag's triangle and a VPS. The second half of the project involves learning how to use visuals (text, images) and other media (music, sound effects) to enhance their scripts. Students are reminded that every filmmaker will tell you that without a good story, all the special effects in the business will not improve your film.

Because the student's voice-over is perhaps the most powerful part of a digital story, oral storytelling is practiced to develop a student's comfort and confidence with her voice. Before doing any writing, students begin to explore the Change theme by using short oral storytelling exercises, referred to as "story sparks" by Jay O'Callahan and others. Students are prompted to tell a one-minute story about a time when they had accomplished something they were proud of or a time when they did something that they were not supposed to do. Lipman's story coaching model is introduced at this point to establish the rules of how feedback is given on each other's story. During this practice time, story elements such as transformation and tension are not stressed.

### *Photo Essay*

In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Lucy Calkins comments on the importance of images to the young writer, pointing out that "until the second and third grade a child's predominant means of self-expression is drawing...Not only the act of drawing but also the picture itself can provide a supportive framework for young writers" (Ewald 2001). Writing *into* the image has been very useful in helping students connect to the feelings

and sensory details of their stories. For over thirty years, Wendy Ewald has practiced photo essay writing with children. In reflecting on her work, she said, “Many of the students I worked with had trouble writing; they would labor painfully over a sentence or two. But when they worked from a photograph that had something to do with their lives, especially a picture they had taken themselves, they were able to write more – and what they wrote about was their own experiences” (2001). Digital storytelling is very much a form of documenting one’s life. Students who are able to create their own images vs. relying on Google’s image search strengthen their role as authors in the story writing process. In addition, for the student who is unable to visually map her story, one personally significant image provides student and teacher with a valuable starting point for developing the story. During the first week of the project, students are encouraged to bring in photographs from home and start making a list of possible photographs that could be taken with the school’s digital camera.

Ewald counters the story visualization advice of Ohler, Torres, Haven, and others by having students write first about what they would like to shoot with their cameras. After briefly writing about a subject, students are asked to create a list of images suggested by their writing then proceed with shooting (2001). This writing is more analogous to draft writing or journaling than structured paragraph or story writing.

Lambert acknowledges the related approach of pulling out shoeboxes of old photographs, spreading them out on a table and selecting ones that evoke story. With a rough storyboard in front of them, many have scripted a successful digital story. However, he cautions that basing a story on only the images immediately available possibly leaves out parts of the story that were never represented in your archive (2002).

## Story Writing

In the non-traditional composition approach to story writing, the actual structured writing is the last step. Ohler, Haven, and those in the filmmaking camp stress the visualization of the story prior to attempting to apply the story form. Table 7 depicts Haven's and Ohler's suggested steps for developing a story.

Table 7: Non-traditional Composition Approaches to Story Writing

| From Haven's <i>The Write Right Story Writing Progression</i> (2001):  | From Ohler's <i>Telling Your Story</i> (2004):   |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Create an idea that launches the story.</li><li>2. Create the main character.</li><li>3. Define the story theme and story question.</li><li>4. Layout story structure.</li><li>5. Define and create necessary supporting characters.</li><li>6. Determine the viewpoint.</li><li>7. Map the scenes.</li><li>8. Make it real. Visualize the setting, character, and event details.</li><li>9. Determine the starting point of the story. What is the first event that the reader <i>must</i> see?</li><li>10. Record an oral telling of the first draft. Re-record until you are satisfied.</li><li>11. Write the story.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Get a story idea</li><li>2. Create a story map</li><li>3. Pitch it to your teacher or peers</li><li>4. Create a storyboard</li><li>5. Script/Write story</li><li>6. Review, rehearse, revise</li><li>7. Production/Post-production</li><li>8. Performance</li><li>9. Assessment/improvement</li></ol> |

Haven cited the myth of "The story will reveal itself to me as I write" as one of seven common ideas that hinders students' story writing. He states, "no writing should be attempted without a clearly defined ending in mind" (2000). I am not as strict about limiting student draft writing. For me, journaling is an effective method of initially

exploring my thoughts and feelings on a topic. I feel better when I have something down on paper, something to anchor me as I navigate my way through the murky waters of crafting a story. Free writes on the Change theme will be assigned during class and for homework through the first two weeks of the project.

#### **4.3 Stage 3: Teaching/Modeling of Elements of a Digital Story**

*If we expect our children to be both consumers and producers of visually communicated ideas, we have to ask ourselves, 'How do we prepare them for that visual world?' If we expect them to be fluent in this new visual language, where do we begin teaching the visual grammar and visual vocabulary skills that will help them both understand and present concepts and ideas that use images as well as or instead of text? (Theodosakis 2001)*

Once students possess a working definition of a basic story, they need to practice applying it to stories presented in various media. Story mapping is used to illustrate the structural story elements of beginning, middle, and end (Freitag's triangle), but then to develop the visual grammar identified by Theodosakis. After story-mapping transcripts of previously created digital stories, children's picture books and graphic novels are used to provide practice in deconstructing visual relationships. Comic books have been overlooked as an inexpensive tool for students to easily see both story and visual elements depicted in a variety of ways. George Lucas' early years were influenced by Carl Bark's *Uncle Scrooge McDuck*. He credits the famed Walt Disney cartoonist by saying, "My greatest source of enjoyment in Carl Barks' comics is in the imagination of his stories...[they] are very cinematic. They have a clear beginning, middle, and end, and operate in scenes, unlike many comic strips and books...I think the reason Carl Barks'

comics have endured and have had such international appeal is primarily their strength as *good stories*” (Barks 1987).

Teaching the elements of a digital story involves critique, discussion, and practice of the seven elements. In the previous chapter, over-emphasis on modeling was cited as a common issue when introducing the elements of an effective digital story. When students are only shown a model digital story and told, “Make yours like this one,” students can quickly become overwhelmed by the breadth of a digital storytelling project. Increasing students’ comprehension of abstract and complex concepts like economy or dramatic question can be accomplished by providing students with practice in manipulating the media elements of a digital story.

Deconstruction is most effective when students are on the computer with a copy of the project file used to create the sample digital story. With the open *iMovie* or *MovieMaker* file in front of them, students receive important time to experiment with how text and different sequences of images change a story’s impact. Digital story exercises where students are given the start of a script and told to select images to support it can be useful before students start building their first digital story. Reassembling a digital story with its elements all out of order is another practical exercise to reinforce many of the seven elements. In addition, creating a digital story as a whole class on a famous person, such as Jackie Robinson is another effective way to introduce digital stories to students and collaborate on writing the script. This was the approach I used with my class that followed the Place Story project.

In the Future Work section of Chapter 5, I describe a prototype that will provide interactive examples of student-produced digital stories that demonstrate the effective use

of the seven elements. Currently, only one website exists that explains the seven elements with accompanying student-produced digital stories. Unfortunately, the stories lack most of the elements listed in Ohler's story definition. Digital storytelling in education is one of few practices without an easily accessible archive of past student work. Teachers cannot go to their library and check out a CD of sample stories to model for their students.

As stated previously, a comprehensive course in media literacy is not necessary for managing a successful digital storytelling project. US schools lag far behind England in encouraging critical analysis of media. The UK's National Curriculum has worked closely with The British Film Institute to publish numerous resources for developing what they call students' "cineliteracy." Freeze Frame and Sound and Image are two of eight techniques the BFI's *Moving Image in the Classroom* recommends to teachers to help students understand the "language of the moving image text" (2000). These two techniques will be incorporated into the modeling and deconstruction of a digital story. Deconstruction of media is essential to developing media literacy. During this stage of the project, commercials, music videos, videoblogs, and public service announcements are shown and discussed in terms of the seven elements.

#### **4.4 Stage 4: Managing the Technology and Production Process**

Teaching technology has very little to do with teaching digital storytelling. The technical skills related to using most novice non-linear editing systems consist of three easily learned tasks: importing media, dragging and dropping that media on the timeline, and aligning items on the timeline (Figure 17). These three skills comprise eighty percent

of the technical skill needs of a digital storytelling project. I have intentionally avoided discussing this part of the process to focus on story literacy instead of tool literacy.

The technical skills of learning *iMovie* or *MovieMaker* are taught in the context of deconstruction. When students are practicing with text and sequencing images, this is when they learn how to import files and move items around on the timeline. Time-based media is the most challenging concept that tests students technical skills. Students often become locked in a slide-by-slide mentality learned from *Powerpoint*. The idea that you can control everything on the screen down to the hundredth of a second is not essential nor understanding how the audio and video tracks can layer each other. For the first time digital storyteller, these concepts should be discussed minimally. Having a large poster of a digital story timeline is a valuable visual to have in the classroom alongside Freitag's triangle and other sample story maps.

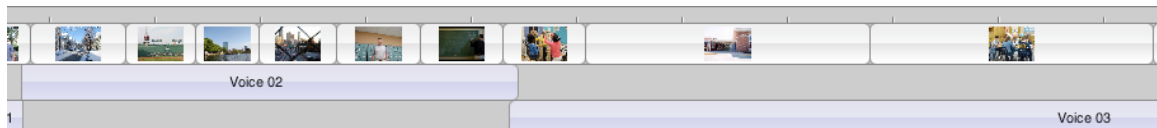


Figure 17: *iMovie* Timeline

#### **4.5 Stage 5: Assessment, Screening, and Distribution**

##### *Assessment*

Assigning a grade to a digital story should be considered a low priority when implementing a digital storytelling project for the first time. Rubrics that incorporate a scaffolding view of learning will yield the most useful information. In addition, rubrics

created by other teachers can be a useful starting point from which teachers can work backwards, determining how they will address each area of project.

While committed to developing an approach that produces stories that indeed prove technology and storytelling can be combined to meet state writing standards, I am more concerned with students' view of themselves as authors. In addition to post-assessments of story and visual literacies, a short survey prompts students to respond to: *Are you a writer? A storyteller?*

### *Screening*

Once all student digital stories are completed, the class will view them and apply Lipman's story coaching methods. Each student will be given an opportunity to receive appreciations on her digital story and ask for feedback. Suggestions for improvement are only given if asked for by the student. Final revisions are made before the stories are shared with parents and other members of the school community.

### *Distribution*

A compilation DVD of all of the digital stories is burned for each student. With the students' permission and copyright clearance, a sample of the digital stories are posted on the school's website where other members of the school community can learn about the project and provide feedback on the stories – all feedback is reviewed by an adult before posting to the site.